Hodgson, Wood Corner

"Digging Up Beauty."

By Francis Dickie.

On the rolling windswept coulee land of the Alberta dry-belt one sees today here and there the battered remains of discarded automobiles bleaching in the hard sunlight in the same spot where a quarter of a century ago lay the bones of buffalo, which latter are all gathered now for fertilizer.

On the steep sides of the rugged coulees of this same region flourishes in plenty the lowly juniper root, a shrub apparently as useless to mankind as worn out autos.

By no wildest fantasy of the imagination could anyone dream that from a conjunction of parts of these two so immeasureable different materials could come anything valuable, and more incredible still, something of surpassing beauty.

But it is an astonishing world.

With such a recipe as; a dash of old Dame Nature, a bit of the product of Henry Ford, a boy-rancher's hobby, a touch of necessity, and, most important of all, the queer workings of Blind chance---with such a recipe mixed in the wilderness of the Alberta badlands, almost anything can happen. And it has.....

Yet for a complete examination for the working out of this recipe, it is necessary to now go a little way back in time and a few thousand miles in distance from the parched dry-belt region of Canada to the damp and misty atmosphere of Scotland.

Here in the year 1885, at Barrington Hall, a sturdy male child was born. Times were changing. The Scots, always a restless race, were turning more than ever to far fields. At the age of fifteen the before

mentioned sturdy infant, now known and duly registered at the place of his birth as W.G.Hodgson' left the historic dampness of his island home and sought fortune and adventure in the Canadian West.

He got a job on a stock ranch on the Alberta prairies. Ten years later he was one of the best horsemen of the region. Hodgson's prowess brought him an offer from one of those travelling shows to join them as a performer. With the show he wandered back and forth across the American continent. Presently, however, he realized he was first, foremost and for always a man of the open range. Yielding to this nostalgia he returned to the Canadian dry-belt.

He purchased a ranch near the frontier town of Dorothy, Alberta. During his former years of life on the range he had been deeply interested in geology and natural history. The country where he settled was a paradise for anyone having such bents. Soon the cowboy rancher scientist succeeded in locating an exceedingly valuable find of the remains of a dinosaur, almost a complete one. This led to other discoveries,and soon he was gathering all these to fill orders for Eastern museums. By way of not falling down in his natural history, he assembled a collection of the moths and butterflies of the dry-belt for Baron de Rothschild. These activities and the conducting of a cattle ranch would have been sufficient for anyone but a transplanted Scot.

But what has all this to do with old Fords bleacing on the plains, and juniper shrubs?

Cowboy-rancher Hodgson, his dinosaur bones all safely tucked away in ornate museum cases, the last butterfly impaled,and with contented steers strolling on his paid-for acres---rancher Hodgson, at last in the year 1928, had a little spare time such as is the due of every country gentleman.

Now awoke the old inclination toward sculpturing that all these years had been awaiting time and chances for expression.

It truly was a most ironical situation for in the dry-belt the only tree of any claim to the name is the soft cottonwood. However, this was all in reach, and sufficient for the prentice hand.

As he galloped his horse one afternoon in 1930 through the juniper shrub on a coulee side in rounding up some stray steers, the pony lost a shoe, caught in a clinging root.

Rancher Hodgson dismounted and picked up the shoe, bringing with it the holding juniper. Thus once more did pure chance bring out, as she has done so often in the past, a valuable discovery. For something in the shape of the root cried attention to the artistic eye of the rancher.

For a quarter of a century he had lived surrounded by thousands of this lowly shrub. It grows plentifully in many parts of North America and other lands. The so terribly twisted root he held in his hand had shadowy subtle outlines in which the sculptor sensed possibilities for the human figure.

Out of the first root was created the diminutive figure of an Indian.

The rancher sculptor found at once that not only had he been handed a marvellous medium, but one utterly unlike any other kind. In the regular course of ordinary sculpture the artist starts in to carve,chisel or model out in wax, plaster, clay, wood or stone an object already pictured in his mind, or to copy an animate person, animal or inanimate object.

Juniper sculpture presented an entirely new problem. The root's natural formation, grain and coloring influence the entire work, controlling to a certain extent the sculptor. Yet their variety is so wide and remarkable that Mr.Hodgson has instilled into his material countless moods and characteristics of scores of different human types.

It seems impossible to have inspired these dust-caked bits of prairie shrubbery into so much life and movement, forms so instinct with loveliness and power.

The roots, by reason of their various twistings, peculiar turns and hollows, required special cutting tools. After trying many things, the artist found by chance that the magnets in Ford automobiles could be made into instruments for his needs. So now never does he pass the battered remains of one of these upon the wide prairie without lifting part of these bleaching "new bones" of civilization.

Thus after three years of toiling ever toward perfection, the rancher-artist in 1933 gave his first private showing to a small group of Eastern critics. Heartened by the warmth of their reception of the new strange type of sculpture, the rancher-artist is preparing exhibits for showing in the great art centers of the world.

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The boyhood memory of lovely wood carvings at his home in England, the latent necessity for artistic self-expression, the stark loneliness of the depression years on an Alberta ranch and the accident of a stumbling foot....all these combined in strange coincident to make of W.Garstang Hodgson not the rancher, geologist or naturalist which he had intended, but one of the most outstanding artists in wood carving in America today.

Born at Barrington Hall on the Scottish border and educated in a monastery in Yorkshire where he saw much fine wood carving, Garstang Hodgson, nevertheless received no training in this craft. He came to Western Canada at the turn of the century where he homesteaded, became a trick rider in a travelling show, a geologist, a naturalist and finally a rancher, but without a single thought of devoting his life to the art which now absorbs him.

It was when he was crossing a coulee on his ranch near Dorothy,Alta. one day that he addidentaly kicked a juniper root and picking it up,became intrigued with the natural rhythm and beauty of its growth. But it was not till he had whittled and carved 300 such roots that he created the first satisfying miracle of a figurine,forerunner of hundreds of exquisite pieces which in the succeeding years were to bring him recognition, and a tidy remuneration.

Prior to this time he had been carving in cottonwood bark as a hobby,but he soon tired of this and exhausted the possibilities, so that with the family fortunes at low ebb due to the zero point of cattle prices, his juniper root discovery was a real godsend,particularly as oak, walnut and mahogany were not procurable.

He carves gnomes and witches,slender young girls, grotesque hags, expressive black faces or ethereal pale nudeness,depending on inspiration His figurines have been exhibited throughout Canada,at the Paris

International Exhibition, at the Empire Exhibition in Glasgow, Scotland, and at the exhibit of the Calgary Branch of the Canadian Handicraft Guild.

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